

Proper 5 Year A

Ever since Adam and Eve asserted their independence from God and lost Eden, God has been planning a way to rescue humanity and all creation from sin and death. Sin and death have reigned supreme since the exile from Eden. Abel has been murdered by Cain, idolatry has been introduced to the world and humanity has tried to build a tower to reach Heaven. Sin became so prevalent that God decided to start over. He destroyed the world with a flood. Only 8 people – Noah and his family and two of every living creature were saved by means of the ark. According to the commentary in Tanach: The first 2,000 years from creation were the Era of Desolation. The 10 generations from Noah had failed. “With the emergence of Abraham, the Era of Desolation had come to an end and the Era of Torah had begun.”

Abraham is descended from Shem, Noah’s son, through a lengthy and convoluted lineage. Terah is his father. The family lives in the upper reaches of the Euphrates River Valley, in Ur of the Chaldeans. From Ur the family migrates to Haran where Terah and one of his sons die leaving an orphan named Lot.

The Lord called Abraham telling him to leave his roots, his family, and his current life and go to a land God would show him. It was a challenge and a test. Abraham must have considered God trustworthy because he pulled up stakes and left Haran. He took his wife Sarah and his brother’s son Lot and all his possessions they had accumulated and set out for Canaan.

When they arrive in Caanan, God spoke to Abraham again. This time with a blessing and a promise. God blessed Abraham by saying that God would make of him a great nation and in him all families on earth will be blessed. He continued his journey and settled near Shechem and God appeared to him again. This time God promised “to your offspring I will give this land”. Abraham will not live to see the fulfillment of that promise. Can you imagine the faith in God it must have taken to believe that God would keep his promise? Sarah was unable to have children. How could he become the father of many nations? But that is another story.

God also calls us to leave our comfort zones and go into the future by faith. We often do not see the result of our prayers. We must trust that God will keep his promises to us about our future. God can do all things.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of Abraham’s faith in God as counting for righteousness. He makes very clear that adherence to the law is insufficient to deal with the roots of sin. We cannot by our own efforts reach God’s just demands. The Law, which came later than God’s promises to Abraham, only works to confront us with our offenses to God. I can diagnose our sickness but cannot provide a cure. We cannot, through our own efforts become perfect and so earn our salvation. If we could do that, God promises to Abraham would null and void because they are based on Abraham’s faith in God. Paul concludes that anyone, Jew or Gentile, who has faith like Abraham shares in his righteousness.

What a relief. I know from my own experience how ineffective my attempts at self-improvement are. I can lose the weight but it comes back because my love of sweets has not been dealt with. All the rules about dieting just remind me of my failure. Can I place my faith in the goodness of God and stop relying on my ability to become holy on my own? Good question for all of us to ponder.

There are 3 sermons worth of material in our Gospel. Fear not, I am only going to give one. The theme connecting them is that Jesus goes where the need is greatest. He connects with those we know

need him. His critics are people who loathe sinners and avoid them as much as possible. They are satisfied with and protective of their own sanctity. They feel that sinners are beneath them.

When Jesus called Matthey to follow him, he called a man who was a collaborator with the Roman government. Matthey collected taxes from his own people and in turn gave the proceeds to the Roman authorities. Tax collectors were hated by the people. Before Jesus' time, the Romans had a system of auctioning off the authority to collect taxes to the highest bidder. They were required to give the Roman an agreed upon sum. They could keep the rest. This method was ripe for corruption. Tax collectors had a reputation for exacting more than their share and keeping the rest. By Jesus' time this system had been abandoned and was replaced by volunteers. Never the less, tax gatherers were forbidden to enter the Synagogue, testify in court, and were classed with robbers and murderers. They were, however, literate and educated.

Matthew had probably heard Jesus before and was familiar with his message. Perhaps he felt guilty because of his profession. Perhaps he was ready to ditch it all and start a new life. In any event, when Jesus said "follow me" he did.

According to the Gospel of Mark, Matthew gave a feast at his house for Jesus. Matthew does not mention the location but says that many tax collectors and sinners were there. The scribes and the Pharisees were horrified. They asked Jesus' disciples why he did this. Jesus answered them saying "I did not come to call the righteous but the sinners". He quoted the prophet Hoosac saying "Go and learn what this saying means, I desire mercy not sacrifice."

According to Barclay it's as if Jesus was saying "When I make a feast, I invite those who are most conscious of their sins and those whose need of God was greatest". Jesus' priority was people and their needs not outward signs of piety. This should be our priority also.